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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 002954

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2017

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SUBJECT: EVO BACKS HUGO THREAT TO TURN BOLIVIA INTO VIETNAM

REF: A. LA PAZ 2830

[¶](#)B. LA PAZ 2949

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: In an interview released November 4, Bolivian President Evo Morales supported Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's threat to turn Bolivia into another Vietnam for forces that might attempt a coup against Morales. Media pundits and opposition leaders vehemently criticized the statements as an assault on Bolivia sovereignty. Alleged Venezuelan involvement in the Bolivian takeover of Santa Cruz's Viru Viru Airport further ignited criticism of the Bolivian-Venezuelan relationship. Venezuelan "imperialism" has stayed in the headlines since, fed by heated exchanges between opposition and government officials, an alleged attack on the Venezuelan consulate in Santa Cruz, and a scandal involving \$11 million in missing Venezuelan micro-credit loans. Foreign Ministry sources contend the handling of the Viru Viru takeover is universally considered (behind government doors) to have been a significant error that is costing the government public support. Another Foreign Ministry insider added that Evo and his inner circle are genuinely afraid of being removed from power, and are not just using the issue as a rhetorical tool to rally support, distract from domestic problems, or curry favor with Chavez. End Summary.

[¶](#)2. (U) Bolivian President Evo Morales defended Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's October 14 remarks about defending Evo from coups or assassination attempts. In an interview with Chilean daily La Tercera released November 4, Morales echoed Chavez's comments about turning Bolivia into a second Vietnam should the U.S. attempt to unseat Morales and expanded the analogy: "If the empire meddles in Latin America, Latin America will become a second Vietnam." Morales also dismissed Bolivians who took offense to Chavez's threat as "oligarchs, conservatives, and pro-imperialists." He asserted "observers" have been "knocking at the door" of the Bolivian military since 2006 without success, apparently implying foreign powers have been plotting Morales' downfall. He said the military is unresponsive to such overtures because commanders have changed mentality and are against dictatorship. Opposition Deputy Fernando Messmer (Podemos-lower house) responded November 5 to Morales'

statement with "indignation and shame" for "destroying the country" by "following the same line as Chavez."

#### Chavez Chic Loses Luster; Opposition Rallies Around Sovereignty

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13. (C) Morales enters the fray following more than two weeks of silence regarding Chavez's controversial statements, while opposition and government leaders traded insults and spin in the press. Evo's comments are sure to increase media and opposition criticism regarding Venezuela's presence in Bolivia, which still has not died down since the alleged involvement of Venezuelan troops in the October 18 takeover of Santa Cruz's international airport. Chronology follows:

##### --October 14: Apocalypse Not

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez threatened to "turn Bolivia into a new Vietnam" should the Bolivian oligarchy or anyone else try to kill or oust his ally President Evo Morales. In a broadcast from Cuba honoring Che Guevara, Chavez added the Venezuelan people would not "stand by with their arms folded" if Morales is attacked, rather "what you will see is not going to be the Vietnam of ideas ...it will be, God forbid, the Vietnam of arms, the Vietnam of war." Chavez further accused the U.S. of sabotaging efforts by the Bolivian Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, thereby providing an excuse for coup. Opposition and media pundits took strong offense to Chavez's specific "meddling" and attacked the idea of any foreign government using Bolivia as an battleground on sovereignty grounds.

##### --October 18: Viru Viru Involvement Backfires

Bolivian military and national police took over Santa Cruz's Viru Viru International Airport October 18 (ref a), causing a massive backlash of locals to reestablish civilian control. Although the incident ended peacefully October 19, fallout from the supposed involvement of Venezuelan uniformed military in the takeover remains a volatile and debated issue, with some members of the opposition accusing the Venezuelan military of orchestrating and participating in the takeover while the government maintains a small group Venezuelan troops were at the airport to escort Bolivian scholarship winners to study in Venezuela. Santa Cruz Civic Committee leader Branko Marinkovic accused Chavez of "fulfilling his threat" about turning Bolivian into Vietnam. The issue motivated protesters and inspired a slew of editorials damning Venezuelan "interference."

##### --October 21/22: Prefects Rally Against Imperialism (Venezuelan)

Cochabamba Prefect (Governor) Manfred Reyes published a full-page screed in prominent newspapers against Morales, calling on him to "tell your commander Hugo Chavez that Bolivia still has some dignity left and to respect Bolivian sovereignty. Reyes characterized the Viru Viru standoff as resistance to a "brutal repression" engineered by the "Venezuelan military" with Morales' complicity. Reyes said any "intruder that dares to think of Bolivia as another Vietnam, should know that Bolivians are not willing to accept that international humiliation." Another half-page October 22 advertisement signed jointly by five of nine Bolivian prefects (Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Tarija, Beni, and Pando) called for the removal of "all foreign military forces that are intervening in the country's internal matters." Although the statement uses generic references to foreign troops, it is clearly aimed at "interference of the Venezuelan Government in the militarization of the departments and repression against civilians in Santa Cruz and other place of the country." The next day Minister of Defense Walker San Miguel asserted the request was political and unfounded, as there are no foreign military troops that fit the statement's description.

--October 21: Monkey Racism

Presidency Minister (Chief of Staff) Jorge Quintana called Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben Costas "racist and xenophobic" after the Prefect characterized Chavez as a "big monkey, little dictator, coup monger, and coward." Quintana said the remarks implied Morales was the "little monkey."

--October 22: Oligarchs Serving Molotov Cocktails?

Unidentified assailants apparently threw a quarter stick of dynamite and a Molotov cocktail, respectively, at the Venezuelan Consulate and a residence housing Cuban doctors during the early morning hours. There were only minor damages and no injuries. Both Bolivian and Venezuelan government officials condemned the attack, which they blamed the "oligarchy." Bolivian Presidential Spokesman Alex Contreras condemned "this type of cowardly violent action, which is designed to create a climate of tension and panic." (Comment: There was no/no such outrage concerning the October 17 demonstration at the our embassy, where similar dynamite derivatives were tossed over the embassy wall and the crowd attempted to break through the embassy gate. End Comment.) Government Minister Alfredo Rada claimed the attack was inspired by Prefect Costas' "xenophobic" remarks. Opposition leaders, including Podemos leader Jorge Quiroga, denounced the attack as a self-inflicted smokescreen to implement Chavez's "Vietnamization" policy.

--October 22: Venezuelan Micro-credit Scandal

Unrelated to the fallout from Viru Viru, an article in leading daily La Razon investigated the apparent disappearance of \$11 million in Venezuelan micro-credit funds for Bolivia. Although the loan funds were approved, Venezuela apparently decided to revert the loan. According to the National Confederation of Micro and Small Businesses of Bolivia (CONAMYPE), 227 recipients only received a portion of the credit, but they were forced to sign contracts for and their names appear on official lists as receiving the entire amount.

--October 23: Defense Minister Concedes Chavez Should Simmer Down

Referring to his October 15 remarks, Defense Minister Walker San Miguel admitted the Bolivian Government had asked Chavez to tone down his public comments considering current political and regional Bolivian sensitivities, particularly in regard to "healthy" Bolivian disdain for "foreign interference and respect for national sovereignty." San Miguel also rejected the presence of Venezuelan troops in Bolivia and any role they might have in the internal affairs of Bolivia.

Gauging the Damage

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¶4. (U) Almost two weeks after the Viru, Viru incident, fiery editorials and political charges continue. Opposition Senator Walter Guiteras accused the Bolivian Government November 1 of subservience to Chavez, who is using Bolivia to confront the U.S. "This country has shown it will not be disposed to tolerate grand tyrants ... or people who meddle in Bolivian affairs." He accused Chavez of trying to "buy off our conscious," implying Morales was already bought off.

¶5. (C) A reliable foreign ministry contact in the office of the Vice Foreign Minister told us that Morales' ramblings of coup and assassination plots are not just rhetoric to rally the masses, distract from domestic problems, or curry favor with Chavez (although they also serve this purpose), but are based on genuine fears. He said Evo's inner circle is fed a constant diet of conspiracy theories from Chavez that "keep them up at night." This contact also said Morales' inner circle directed the Viru Viru takeover without prompting or influence from Venezuela, and any Venezuelan presence was tertiary and inconsequential. He said the government on "all

"levels" understands this was a "huge mistake" that handed the opposition an easy victory and an issue it can exploit and organize around for the foreseeable future. "Going in (to Viru Viru) and leaving the next day looks bad, there's no getting around that and everyone realizes it." Another Foreign Ministry contact told PolOff that careerists in the MFA considered the Chavez statements a "horrible mistake" that everyone ignored and hoped would go away. The Venezuelan presence at Viru Viru played perfectly into the opposition's hands and will have a lasting negative impact on the government's public support. "Even Bolivians in (government bastion) El Alto care about sovereignty issues; we Bolivians are very sensitive about this."

Comment

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¶ 6. (C) It is unclear what Evo hopes to accomplish by supporting Chavez's inflammatory Vietnam comments. Coming simultaneously with accusations about U.S. coup mongering and connections between the Ambassador and Colombian paramilitary (ref b), Post is bracing for the next outrageous accusation. We remain concerned that this latest and increasingly strident volley of hyperbole may be setting the stage for concrete anti-democratic or anti-U.S. actions on the part of the Morales government. Chavez's Bolivia as Vietnam remarks, followed by the appearance of Venezuelan troops at Viru Viru, gave opposition leaders plenty of ammunition to blast President Morales by association and rally supporters against Venezuelan "imperialism."

¶ 7. (C) Many viewed the government's sending the military into Viru Viru airport, the heartland of the opposition, as a trial balloon to see if, a) the military would follow Evo's orders and b) the opposition would be cowed by the show of force. While the military proved loyal, the opposition certainly was not intimidated. In fact, the quick military withdrawal the following day in the face of massive civilian demonstrations may reflect the conventional wisdom that the military is not willing to use force to impose Morales' will. Even though the airport takeover backfired badly, and the government is taking a beating in the press over its close ties to Venezuela, Evo's latest rhetorical bravado reflects his determination to have his way.

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